The Lord, He Is God:

The Reality of True Religion on Mount Carmel

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37–39).

Introduction

The scene on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18 is one of the most dramatic moments in all of Scripture. The people of Israel had gathered, along with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah, to witness a contest that would settle the question that had lingered over the nation for three and a half years: who is God in Israel? Elijah laid down the challenge in verse 21 with his usual bold clarity, and after an uneasy silence, the people agreed to the terms. Two sacrifices would be prepared, one by the prophets of Baal and one by Elijah, and the God who answers by fire would be revealed as the true God.

The events of 1 Kings 18:25–29, which occurred before the passage we are discussing, revealed part of the story with painful, somewhat dark clarity. The prophets of Baal spent most of the day dancing around their altar, calling out to their false deity, cutting themselves, and crying louder and louder, while Elijah watched and the heavens remained silent. No voice responded. No fire fell. No one answered, and no one paid attention, as verse 29 notes. The emptiness of false religion was exposed publicly and without mercy.

Now in verse 30, Elijah turns to the people and says simply, "Come near to me." What follows in 1 Kings 18:30–40 is the other half of the story, and it is the more important half. While the failure of the prophets of Baal shows the emptiness of false religion, Elijah's actions and prayer reveal something far more significant: the reality of true religion. This reality is the focus of the present study and is explored along four lines.

True Religion Is Founded Upon the Revealed Will of God

The first thing Elijah does when the people draw near is mend the altar of the Lord that had been broken down. This is no minor detail. Everything that follows in Elijah's actions on Mount Carmel is meant to lead the people back to what God had already revealed and to restore

them to the foundations of true religion as God Himself established it. The contrast with the prophets of Baal is clear and intentional. Verse 26 tells us they danced around the altar they had made. Verse 30 tells us Elijah repaired the altar that the Lord had commanded.

The altar itself, whose very name means "place of sacrifice," has been central to the worship of God from the earliest pages of Scripture. It existed before the Law of Moses was ever given. The first thing Noah did when he and his family emerged from the ark after the flood was to build an altar to the Lord and offer burnt offerings on it (Genesis 8:20). Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob each built altars at significant moments in their encounters with God. The altar was the designated place for making sacrifices for sin, and through that sacrifice, the people could draw near to the Lord in communion. To repair the altar was to declare, in the clearest possible way, that there is no way to approach God except on the terms He has Himself commanded.

The way Elijah repaired the altar makes this point even clearer. Verse 31 says he took twelve stones, one for each tribe of Israel, just as God had spoken to Jacob. By this time, the northern kingdom of Israel had long accepted the political division of the twelve tribes as a settled reality. Elijah refused to go along with that. Using twelve stones was a subtle but unmistakable statement that dividing the nation into two kingdoms was not in line with God's revealed will. From the very beginning, the twelve tribes were meant to be one people under one covenant Lord. Roger Ellsworth comments on the importance of this choice.

> It is significant that Elijah used twelve stones to repair the altar, one for each of the original twelve tribes of Israel. In so doing he was reminding the people of the clearly defined will of God for their lives, and exposing their failure to comply with that will. One sin had led to another in Israel. Because of the sinfulness of King Solomon the kingdom was divided. Because of the sinfulness of Jeroboam idol worship had been introduced into the ten tribes. Because of the sinfulness of Ahab the worship of Baal had flourished. The people themselves were not guiltless in all of this ungodliness, for they had tolerated and participated in it. In rebuilding this altar, Elijah was taking the people back to what God demanded, one kingdom completely devoted to his service and governed by his laws. This may all seem very remote and irrelevant to us, but the truth is that no great work of revival begins until people are powerfully reminded of the clearly defined will of God in Scripture and are shown how seriously they have departed from that will.[1]

[1]Roger Ellsworth, *Standing for God* (Edinburgh, 1994), 70.

The way Elijah prepared the sacrifice is also very meaningful. In verse 33, we read that he arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces, and laid it on the wood. This follows almost exactly the instructions God gave Moses for the burnt offering in Leviticus 1:6–8, where the same language about cutting up the offering and arranging the wood appears. These actions were not random; Elijah was following the specific pattern God had given to His people and doing it with deliberate care. In a situation where everything depended on God's response, Elijah's careful attention to the details of God's instructions was itself a powerful act of faith.

These details about the sacrifice also pointed to something much greater than what happened on Mount Carmel. The entire sacrificial system in the Old Testament was established by God as a picture, a preview of the one final sacrifice for sin that Jesus Christ would offer on the cross. Every part of the burnt offering, the wood, the cutting, the careful arrangement, hinted at that ultimate act of substitution. By carefully following the prescribed pattern, Elijah was perhaps unknowingly guiding the people's eyes toward the redemption at the core of all true religion.

Our practical approach is clear. When those we care about stray from faith or turn away from the Lord, the proper response is not to meet them on their terms or accept their distance from biblical truth. Like Elijah, we should lead them back to foundational truth. We must lead them to the Word of God and to what He has revealed and requires. True religion is always anchored in God's revealed will, and every generation is called to return to that foundation. The Word of God is always the answer for the believers who are prone to wander from the Lord.

True Religion Requires Faith

After repairing the altar and preparing the sacrifice, Elijah does something that seems almost irrational at first. He instructs the people to fill four large jars with water and pour them over the burnt offering and the wood. They repeat this three times, until the water flows down the altar and fills the trench Elijah has dug around it (1 Kings 18:33–35). We should remember that the drought has lasted over three years. Water must have been incredibly valuable, yet the prophet soaks the sacrifice until not a single piece of the wood remains dry. Those watching would have scratched their heads, wondering what the prophet was doing!

The contrast with the prophets of Baal is again significant. They had done everything humanly possible to persuade their god to answer, crying, dancing, cutting themselves, raving on through the heat of the day. Elijah does the precise opposite. He makes the task humanly impossible and then stands back. The point could not be clearer: what is about to happen will be entirely and unmistakably the work of the one true and living God. No one watching could attribute the fire to any natural cause or human ingenuity. Arthur Pink reflects on the faith shown in this remarkable act. He writes,

> Let us pause and behold here the strength of the prophet's faith in the power and goodness of his God. The pouring of so much water upon the altar, the flooding of the offering and the wood beneath it, would make it appear utterly impracticable and unlikely for any fire to consume it. Elijah was determined that the Divine interposition should be the more convincing and illustrious. He was so sure of God that he feared not to heap difficulties in His way, knowing that there can be no difficulty unto One who is omniscient and omnipotent. The more unlikely the answer was, the more glorified therein would be his Master. O wondrous faith which can laugh at impossibilities, which can even increase them so as to have the joy of seeing God vanquish them! It is the bold and venturesome faith which He delights to honour. Alas, how little of this we now behold. Truly this is a day of small things. Yes, it is a day when unbelief abounds. Unbelief is appalled by difficulties, and schemes to remove them, as though God needed any help from us.[2]

The faith of true religion is seen even more clearly in the prayer Elijah offers in 1 Kings 18:36–38. The difference from the frantic cries of the prophets of Baal could not be more noticeable. While they shouted, screamed, and repeated themselves in growing desperation, Elijah spoke with calm and confident trust to the God he knew and served. He prayed at the time of the evening sacrifice, as verse 36 mentions, which was also when the daily sacrifice took place at the temple in Jerusalem. Even in this detail, Elijah was aligning himself with the way God had instructed His people to worship.

Elijah's prayer is based on God's promises. He calls God "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel," the covenant-keeping God who promised Abraham an everlasting covenant in Genesis 17:7–8. He prays on the basis of a promise God has already made, a promise that He would never completely forsake Abraham's descendants. This is the correct foundation for faith

[2]Arthur W. Pink, *The Life of Elijah* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 149.

in prayer: not the strength of our emotions, not clever arguments or many words, but the sure word of God's own promise. We pray in faith when we pray in line with what God has already revealed. We find many times in Scripture that prayers follow this pattern. God's people take hold of His promises and present them back to Him as the basis for their petitions.

True Religion's Primary Concern Is God's Glory and the Good of Mankind

The content of Elijah's prayer reveals the motivating concern that has driven his entire ministry and that now, at this climactic moment, finds clear expression. He prays in I Kings 18:36–37: "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back."

These words summarize both great commandments that our Lord mentioned in Matthew 22. The primary concern is that the Lord would be known, honored, and glorified as the only true God in Israel. This has been Elijah's main focus since his first appearance before Ahab, and it remains so here at the height of his public ministry. Everything he has done on Mount Carmel, from rebuilding the altar to soaking the sacrifice, has been driven by this one ultimate goal: that Jehovah alone would be exalted. A.W. Pink expands on this truth. He writes,

> Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that Thou art God in Israel, v. 36. This was Elijah's first petition, and mark well the nature of it, for it makes clearly manifest his own character. The heart of the prophet was filled with a burning zeal for the glory of God. He could not bear to think of those wrecked altars and martyred prophets. He could not tolerate the land being defiled with the God-insulting and soul-destroying idolatry of the heathen. It was not himself that he cared about, but the horrible fact that the people of Israel were entertaining the idea that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had abdicated in favour of Baal. His spirit was stirred to its depths as he contemplated how blatantly and grievously Jehovah was dishonoured. O that we were more deeply moved by the languishing state of Christ's cause upon earth today, by the inroads of the enemy and the awful desolation he has wrought in Zion! Alas that a spirit of indifference, or at least of fatalistic stoicism, is freezing so many of us. The chief burden of Elijah's prayer was that God should vindicate Himself that day,

> that He would make known His mighty power, that He would turn the people's hearts back unto Himself.[3]

Pink's words carry a convicting weight. Christians who read them should ask whether their own prayer life is driven more by personal need than by a desire for God's glory. Elijah knelt on Carmel not to promote his own reputation or agenda, but to see the name of Jehovah exalted before a watching nation. That same concern should motivate the prayers of every child of God. The God who answered by fire on Carmel is still on His throne, and He still turns His ear to the prayer of a believer who trembles with zeal for His honor and glory.

Elijah's prayer does not end with the glory of God. We see in verse 37 that it immediately extends to the good of the people: "that you have turned their hearts back." The whole purpose of the drought, as we have traced it through these studies, was never judgment for its own sake. It was always aimed at awakening and restoring a people who had wandered far from their God. Elijah's intercession for the nation of Israel shows the same concern. He desires not only that God be glorified but also that sinners are turned and saved. These two desires, the glory of God and the salvation of the lost, are never in opposition. They are two inseparable expressions of the same love, perfectly united in the prophet's prayer on Mount Carmel.

Another striking contrast we see in this text is that the prophets of Baal showed no concern for the people's welfare. They danced and cut themselves and raved, but nowhere in the account is there any indication of genuine care for those who stood watching. False religion, for all its noise and emotional display, cannot produce genuine love for others because love for others flows from love for God, and love for God flows from knowing Him as He truly is. True religion, rooted in the revelation of the living God, always tends toward both His glory and the good of those made in His image.

True Religion Alone Has the Answer to Man's Deepest Need

The question that had governed the entire contest on Mount Carmel was stated in 1 Kings 18:24: "The god who answers by fire, he is God." Everyone present was looking for an answer. The prophets of Baal had looked all day and received none. Now, in verses 38 and 39, the answer came for Elijah, and it came without delay. The fire of the Lord fell and consumed the

[3]Pink, *The Life of Elijah*, 151–152.

burnt offering, the wood, the stones, the soil, and even the water in the trench, and nothing remained. The response of the people who saw it was immediate and unanimous. They could no longer remain standing. As the covenant people, they should have known, but they did not. Overwhelmed and undone, they fell on their faces and cried out: "The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God!"

The fire had a specific significance that the people who knew the Law of Moses would have understood. In Leviticus 9:24 and I Chronicles 21:26, fire from the Lord consuming a sacrifice was the sign that God had accepted the offering and poured out His wrath upon the substitute. The sacrifice bore what the worshipper deserved, and the fire of divine judgment fell upon it instead of upon him. The altar, the sacrifice, the fire: together they answered the most fundamental question any religion must be able to answer. How can a holy and just God pardon sin? The answer is that His wrath falls upon a substitute, and the sinner goes free.

The prophets of Baal had no answer to that question. Their god was a fiction, their sacrifice an empty gesture, and their prayers addressed to the empty air. False religion in all its forms, however earnest, however emotional, however elaborate, cannot resolve the fundamental problem that stands between sinful man and a holy God. It cannot answer for sin because it does not know the God against whom sin is committed and it has no sacrifice that is adequate to bear His wrath.

Thankfully, God Himself has provided the answer, and the fire that fell on Elijah's sacrifice offers one of the most vivid previews of that answer in the Old Testament. The writer to the Hebrews makes the connection explicit: the whole sacrificial system of the Law was a shadow of the good things to come, fulfilled in the one offering of the body of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 10:1–10). Christ is the true and final substitute. The wrath that consumed the sacrifice on Mount Carmel is the same wrath that fell upon Him on the cross. Just as the fire left nothing behind, so the atoning work of Christ is complete, exhaustive, and sufficient for all who come to God through Him.

Conclusion: The Lord, He Is God

The cry that went up from the people of Israel as they fell on their faces on Mount Carmel was not the conclusion of an argument. It was the response of a soul encountering the

living God. Everything that Elijah had done that afternoon, from the careful repair of the altar to the soaking of the wood, from the brief and confident prayer to the fire that consumed everything in its path, had been designed by God to bring a wandering people back to this single, unshakeable confession: “the LORD, He is God.”

This final study has traced four marks of true religion as Elijah displayed them on Mount Carmel. True religion is founded upon the revealed will of God and refuses to deviate from what He has prescribed. It requires a faith that acts upon God's Word regardless of what human reason or circumstance might suggest. Its primary concern is the glory of God and, inseparably from that, a desire to see sinners receive salvation. True religion possesses the answer to the deepest need of every human being, the need for a holy God to pardon sin through the provision of a sufficient substitute. These four marks together describe not an abstract ideal but the living faith that Elijah embodied, and that the Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled completely at the cross on Mount Calvary.

These six studies have walked with Elijah from the quiet brook Cherith to the widow’s humble home at Zarephath, through his long years of faithful waiting to his fearless stand before Ahab, and finally to that unforgettable afternoon on Mount Carmel, where a nation fell on its face before the living God. The lessons he leaves us ring true in every generation. God still calls His people back to the altar He has prepared. He still cherishes the faith that steps out on His Word rather than on human reasoning. Above all, He longs for His name to be lifted high and for wandering sinners to come to Him in repentance and faith. Let us remember that the fire that roared down in answer to Elijah’s prayer fell once and for all on the cross of Jesus Christ, where God’s wrath met its perfect substitute and the Father’s arms opened wide for all who will come. The LORD, He is God.

"Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Joel 2:13).